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SHAKESPEARE IN 1898.

BY EDMUND GOSSE.

SOME time ago, Mr. Swinburne prophesied that 1894 would in time to come be known as "Walter Scott's year," because, although much that was curious and interesting appeared during the same months, nothing equalled the splendor which was thrown on the memory of Scott by the circumstance of the accidentally simultaneous publication of the "Journal" and other illuminating material. It is not easy to diagnose the state of literary health while the symptoms are upon us, and, as a matter of fact, no one, so far as I am aware, has noted that we are passing through a complete crisis of Shakespearianism. But it is true; and the concentrated activity of Shakespeare scholars in 1898 has been so remarkable that I, in my turn, prophesy that this will be known as "Shakespeare's year." This renewed and impassioned study of a poet who seemed almost hopelessly hackneyed, weighed to the ground under the terrible apparatus of the commentators, is a very striking phenomenon. Here we have a writer so over-written and over-expounded (one might have said) that it was impossible to produce a new sensation regarding him, and behold! a fresh class of students rises who treat his glorious works as if they were reading them for the first time.

This, indeed, is what strikes me as uniting in a common purpose the otherwise very dissimilar and even, on minor points, opposed critics and historians to whose labors I am about to draw attention in some detail. All of them approach their great theme as some farmer on the slopes of Vesuvius might visit his field after an eruption. It seems hopeless at first; here is the spot, indeed, but all is covered with scorix and dust, all is hidden with light and volatile matter steadily super-imposed. It would be madness to waste top dressings on that white and

sterile coat of ash, and the Italian farmer is tempted to leave the place altogether, and seek fresh land. But he does better; he removes the scoriæ—it is surprising how light they are—and he finds the rich fields beneath practically unhurt. That, as it seems to me, is the central instinct which has dictated to the latest students of Shakespeare their attitude. They found the poet buried under conjectures and supposition; theories of all kinds had been started, flying in the wind and dropping, almost unfelt, on to other theories, and helping to conceal and sterilize the truth.

Twenty years ago there was a great and useful movement in the sceptical direction. The text of Shakespeare had been treated with a senseless superstition. Every scene of every play had been, without question, attributed, exactly as we possess it, to his inspired pen, and no sort of investigation was made into the sources of our authority. The doubting scholars came suddenly upon us with their tests and formulas; they pointed out discrepancies and exposed illusions. There were proposed, and for the moment accepted, standards of versification. At such and such periods of his life, Shakespeare wrote thus and thus. If we found in his works of a certain date other methods of composition, then those passages were not written by Shakespeare or not at that time. An immense amount of good was done by these investigations, but they were carried much too far. People would take a play and, by using their verse-tests, declare that this scene was written by Kyd and that act by Peele. The passion grew by what it fed on, and if all the conjectures which were set forth had been accepted, in the lump, not one single unmutilated work, except perhaps "*The Tempest*," would have been left to Shakespeare's credit. Then there came a reaction, and Mr. Swinburne merrily quizzed all those good folk who counted verses with their fingers because, he said, they had no ears to count with. The school of chemical experiment applied to poetry fell into discredit; but it had done excellent service. It had exploded a great many errors, it had observed a great many un-noticed facts, and above all it had removed the tiresome superstition of Shakespeare's being a kind of inspired idiot, who blindly produced a body of absolutely perfect work without any of the living inequalities of an artist.

Among the manifestations of the new Shakespearians of the

last few months—all, it must be remembered, working unconsciously of the labors of the rest—the earliest place in time must be given to Mr. Sidney Lee. This gentleman has for seven years held the highly responsible office of Editor of the “Dictionary of National Biography,” which he took up when the severity of the task proved too much for the health of Mr. Leslie Stephen, who had founded it in 1882. Mr. Sidney Lee is one of the most competent and brilliant of the younger school of English writers, and the rigor of his duties, their constant strain on his attention, and the width of range which they demand, have marvellously edged and tempered his intellect. This Spartan training among facts and dates, when, as I once heard the Master of the Temple very wittily say, the motto of a writer has to be the funereal one, “No flowers—by request,” is as beneficial to certain minds as the laxity of journalism is hurtful. Mr. Sidney Lee has certainly thriven upon it like the *herb marjoram*, that must be crushed if it is to grow. His biographies have become more and more admirable, until his “Shakespeare,” which, happily, perhaps, came so late in alphabetical order, is a masterpiece.

This biography may be called an “article,” but it is really lengthy enough to form a book, and I am, in fact, enabled to state that it will before very long be published in separate form, with additional illustrative matter. It is not, I hope, a breach of confidence to announce that in this extended form it will be found to contain interesting new information about Thomas Thorpe and the W. H. of the “Sonnets,” which will certainly attract a good deal of attention to one of Mr. Lee’s appendices. It may be found that he has solved at last the mystery of the publication of those poems, as so many mysteries are removed, by showing that no mystery exists. To Mr. Lee’s “Life of Shakespeare,” as it already lies before the public, I must however confine myself.

If we ask ourselves what it is that Mr. Lee has accomplished in his remarkable biographical monograph, the answer appears to be that he has resumed in a perfectly sober and logical survey the facts about Shakespeare’s life as they lie scattered over a thousand diverse sources. While other biographers of the poet have endeavored by a more or less reckless network of ingenious guesses to form a plausible portrait of him, not daring to trust alone

to what is certainly and finally known, Mr. Lee has had the courage to discard conjecture altogether, and to content himself by drawing into focus all the disjointed facts. This had been in measure done before. It was first attempted in 1709 by the poet laureate, Nicholas Rowe; Malone, a century later, searched systematically among the official papers at Stratford; while, above all, the late Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps spent a lifetime in collecting what Mr. Lee calls "massive material" for a biography. Far be it from me to seem to speak disrespectfully of that estimable scholar, whose courteous hospitality I once enjoyed with profit in the extraordinary sort of Indian village in which he stored his literary treasures above Brighton. But the mind of Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps had no leaning toward the synthetic; he could not marshal his information. A fact to him was what a primrose was to Peter Bell, and his "Outline of a Life of Shakespeare" is one of the most chaotic books in existence. The results of important research are there, but they lie in distressing confusion.

It is to Mr. Sidney Lee's praise that, without the use of conjecture—that dangerous critical narcotic—and clinging as close to every spar of fact as Halliwell-Phillipps did, he has yet contrived to make out an intelligible story and to minimize the superstitious or fabulous part of the chronicle. To give an instance: A vast and needless mystery has been made about Shakespeare's wealth, as if the formation of such a fortune as he retired upon were the result of witch-craft. Turn to Mr. Sidney Lee's narrative, and the miracles of Shakespeare's money making become perfectly plain sailing. It is an exceedingly interesting episode in Elizabethan economics, and as we read the careful evidence the biographer puts together, we see how much exaggeration there has been in the treatment of the poet's financial adventures. Shakespeare was about as well off as any other successful actor-manager of the day, but certainly not abnormally prosperous. For instance, we can make out that, from the time of his adopting the profession until 1599, Shakespeare's average annual revenue was about 6,500 dollars of our money to-day. After that date he was much better off; before he retired, his yearly profit from his share of the theatres amounted to at least 25,000 dollars of to-day. This is a large income; but it pales before the profits of a contemporary manager, Edward Alleyn, who was able, without impoverishing his family, to purchase the

manor of Dulwich for £10,000 (equal to half a million dollars to-day), and to devote it to public uses. The receipts of the play houses were exceedingly large, and Mr. Lee thinks that the managers bought plays very cheaply. Ten pounds (500 dollars to-day) is the very highest price for a play recorded in the Elizabethan and Jacobean actors' accounts. It is important to realize, and Mr. Lee states it with minute lucidity, that Shakespeare's fortune was made, not by the writing of his plays, but by his admirable conduct of theatrical business.

While Mr. Sidney Lee was preparing this clear and exact biography of Shakespeare, which is certainly the most complete which we possess, an eminent foreign critic was composing a work inspired by much the same order of ideas, although carried out along very different lines. Dr. Georg Brandes has hitherto been, perhaps, less known to English-speaking readers than to any similar class on the Continent of Europe. Taking France out of the question, Dr. Brandes is certainly at this moment the most eminent foreign critic alive. He is a Dane, and his training was performed in the University of Copenhagen, where he would undoubtedly now be Professor of Belles Lettres if it were not for certain political and religious objections on which it is needless to dilate here. Enough to say that he has produced a curious deadlock, for if the Government will not appoint Dr. Brandes the University will accept no one else, and for a quarter of a century the chair has consequently been in abeyance. Dr. Brandes began to write in the manner which he has now made characteristic about thirty years ago. He was greatly influenced by Sainte-Beuve, and later perhaps by Paul de St. Victor. He was the earliest of the long line of those who have elucidated and interpreted Ibsen, and he has made the great movements of literature in the nineteenth century the study of his life. He has always written with admirable competency on Scandinavian, French and German writers, and he has occasionally ventured on English literature as well. In 1875, as a volume of his great critical work on the nineteenth century, he published his "Romanticism in England," which, however, has never been considered the most original portion of the enterprise. He has produced, moreover, an excellent monograph on Lord Beaconsfield. But English literature has, until now, not been by any means Dr. Brandes' most familiar province.

Armed with long practice in seizing upon the spirit of literary artists from the mere sympathetic study of their lives and writings, in modern instances where academic tradition has had no opportunity to lay down hard and fast opinions, Dr. Brandes has at last come to the conquest of the greatest poet of the world, and the one around whom most of what we call "accepted opinion" has crystallized. He has taken Shakespeare exactly as he has for thirty years been in the habit of taking modern writers like Victor Hugo or Björnson or Heine, and he has grappled with him face to face. He has said to him: "I will not let you go, until you reveal to me the secret of your being." But the first difficulty which confronted him was the lack of abundant and trustworthy information. Of all recent writers, certainly of all in the first rank from Goethe and Byron and Châteaubriand onward, we have full, and in many cases excessive and bewildering, information. As time goes on, the extreme minuteness of our knowledge of contemporary men of genius will tend increasingly to embarrass and overburden criticism. But of the great writers of earlier times our acquaintance, apart from their published works, is usually extremely meagre. How little we certainly know of the detail of the life of Dante, of Cervantes, even of Moliere! It has become the fashion to say that we know next to nothing of that of Shakespeare, and so commentators have thought it needful to weave a web of fabulous conjecture round his name. But to Dr. Brandes, as to Mr. Lee, it has seemed that, by starting in a patient and logical spirit from the mass of existing documents and data, the outline of Shakespeare's career can quite intelligibly be sketched.

Those who read Dr. Brandes' handsome volumes, competently translated under the revision of Mr. William Archer, must recollect that what they have before them was not originally intended for English students. It was published, as all Dr. Brandes' books are, simultaneously in Danish and in German, and it is addressed to readers in the whole north and east of Europe, from Rotterdam to Archangel, and from Trieste to Bergen. If it had been written for English people, it must have dwelt more minutely on the predecessors of Shakespeare. Dr. Brandes is evidently not a specialist about Webster or about Ford. But for foreign readers the great thing is to distinguish Shakespeare from the group, to stand so far away as practically to see nothing defi-

nately but Shakespeare. This is a work which demanded a foreign critic, and where Dr. Brandes has been so happy is in the exact vision he has been able to reproduce of an isolated Shakespeare, lifted, as an English commentator now-a-days scarcely dares to lift him, so high above his contemporaries that they scarcely count. This is not the whole truth, but it is a face of the truth, and the freshness of the Danish critic's standpoint, the vigor and novelty of his impressions, and the determination he shows to present the poet before us as a living figure, make his monograph, in its cunning mixtures of biography and criticism, the best popular or general portrait of Shakespeare yet given to a Continental audience, certainly, and perhaps even to an English one. In his first volume he appears to me rarely to go amiss; in the second, I confess, I find his interpretations of the plays occasionally fantastic.

The charge of forming a judgment independently of the study of contemporary Elizabethan literature cannot, at any rate, be brought against Mr. George Wyndham. The width of reading exemplified by the Introduction to this gentleman's edition of the Poems of Shakespeare has astonished all those who have given a longer time than he and a more unbroken attention to the same "lovely argument." Mr. Wyndham, like another George two hundred years ago, the young poet George Stepney, has shown an erudition which "makes greybeards blush." He has been known to society as a young man of fashion, to politicians as a juvenile Member of Parliament, who, trained originally under Mr. Arthur Balfour, has awakened the highest anticipations. A year or two ago, the mode in which he edited North's "Plutarch" caused more than a ripple on literary opinion in London, but it is safe to say that no one expected Mr. George Wyndham to emerge so suddenly and so completely as he now has done from "the mob of gentlemen who write with ease."

The poems of Shakespeare consist in the main, as any one knows, of three works—of "Venus and Adonis," a love story; of "Lucrece," a narrative merged in a long moral tirade; and of the "Sonnets." In early days the first two of these vastly exceeded the third in popularity; during Shakespeare's lifetime there appeared seven editions of "Venus and Adonis," five of "Lucrece," and only one of the "Sonnets." In the present century this order has been reversed, and while a whole library has been

formed around the Sonnets, the two narrative poems have been neglected more than any other portion of their author's repertory. Mr. Wyndham starts on the assumption, which is contrary to accepted opinion, that the only way in which these three works can profitably be studied is in unison. Here, merely as an instance of that simultaneous attraction to the positive view of Shakespeare's character which I have indicated as the note of criticism this year, I may venture to point out that I had myself, in words published a few weeks before Mr. Wyndham's edition, but certainly not seen by him, emphasized the identity of tone between "*Venus and Adonis*" and the early sonnets, in the pathos of the vain pursuit of adolescent beauty.

As far as the Sonnets are concerned, Mr. Wyndham calls us back from the casuists and the guess-work pedants who forget the poetry in their eagerness to tie it down, cadence by cadence, to some theory of their own. He is freer than any commentator has been—since Armitage Brown in 1838 first began to bewilder us with autobiographical conjectures—from prejudice in favor of one particular hypothesis of subject and address. Even Mr. Sidney Lee is not quite satisfied to leave us alone, but ingeniously argues in favor of Southampton's being Shakespeare's ardent and mysterious friend, the "Master-Mistress of his passion." Mr. Wyndham, not uninterested by the enigma, is yet content to state it, and gives the Southampton and the Herbert arguments impartially, for us to employ our idle moments in discussing. He most justly considers that these personal facts or fancies are no more than the discovery of marble mines in Carrara, or buried statues in Sicily, might be to a great Italian sculptor of the Renaissance; that their prime importance is the stimulus which they gave to the sublime expression of his own individual genius. The position Mr. Wyndham takes up, as one who through a jarring tribe of gesticulating professors leads the neophyte straight to the work of art itself, and bids him contemplate it undisturbed, is one requiring no little courage. Less learning than he himself has proved would scarcely justify it, yet it is completely justified. The publication of this edition of Shakespeare's Poems makes a certain epoch, and clears the ground of a large mass of entirely dead material which has cumbered the ground for sixty years.

With the earliest months of this year, the most illustrious of American editors of Shakespeare, Mr. Horace Howard Furness,

sent forth the eleventh volume of his Variorum Edition, that almost superhuman labor on which he has been engaged so long. This volume is entirely devoted to "The Winter's Tale." No new feature or fresh critical departure marks Mr. Furness' latest appearance, and yet we are quite justified in claiming this veteran among those of the younger school who have set their mark on 1898. Mr. Furness, in his solid and patient progress almost overwhelmed sometimes, like Atlas, "by the too-vast orb of his fate," has prepared the way for these realistic and cautious students. Common sense, an incessant balancing of the exact weight of authority, an impatience of flummery and fustian, these have always been the features of his vast compilation, and have given it that unique value which is admitted all over the world. Possibly because the temper of readers was never before so ripe for it, the "Winter's Tale" seems edited with a greater verve and a more triumphant solution of difficulties than any of its predecessors. This I believe to be an illusion; it is we who have changed, not Mr. Furness; he has at last come into his own. Hardly any wish more pious can at this present date be breathed by those who love English literature, than that Mr. Furness may be given health and opportunity to bring his splendid enterprise to a conclusion.

The "sweet o' the year" of Shakespeare is not bounded even by the notable contributions which I have already mentioned. Less distinctly to my purpose, but not to be overlooked, is the ingenious treatise on the forms of sport known to Shakespeare which Mr. Justice Madden has lately issued; and at the moment that I write there are appearing in the *Saturday Review*, a series of articles, by Mr. Frank Harris, on the personal temperament of the poet as revealed in the texture of the plays. Extraordinary is the vitality and richness of the genius out of whose natural stem so many clusters of fresh foliage can still spring within a single year. For half a century after the death of Shakespeare no definite recognition of his mastery can be discovered. Dryden, to his own immortal honor, first had the courage to claim for the author of "Hamlet" a place among poets which was absolutely transcendent. But he did not carry opinion universally with him, and as a mere curiosity of literature, it would be amusing to reprint what Rymer, the official critic of the reign of William III. found to object to in the conduct and language of Shakespeare's plays. It was he who, in a fine burst of indignation, declared

that "Othello" was a play so faultily constructed and so ignorantly conceived, that it was a disgrace that the players should be allowed to wear the King's uniform when they acted in the part of Iago.

With the reign of Queen Anne, the genuine study of Shakespeare began, and while Addison was reading the plays with rapture and awe, the text was almost simultaneously attracting the attention of Rowe and of Pope, of Sewell and of Theobald. From that time onward, the toil of elucidation has never ceased, but one humdrum scholar after another has succumbed to the irresistible enchantment. A century and a half have exactly passed since the least humble and perhaps the least competent, but certainly not the least celebrated, of Shakespeare's editors, Bishop Warburton, issued the text that passed for authoritative till Dr. Johnson's took its place. One hundred years ago, George Steevens was the reigning editor of the poet, hotly pursued by Isaac Reed. It would pass the memory of man, and is probably known only to Mr. Furness, how many other phantoms have walked since then over the marble of Shakespeare's tomb. They have passed into the land where names are shadows; he is as young, and strong, and (to borrow Coleridge's phrase) as "thousand-souled" as ever. Indeed, as masterpieces are living things and grow long after the decease of those who create them, it may without paradox be said that at no time within three hundred years has Shakespeare been so imperiously vital as he is to-day. The sudden output of vivid simultaneous commentary on his life and work which it has seemed interesting to draw attention to is not to be looked upon as exhausting the theme with any abrupt finality. To fresh generations of minds, Shakespeare will present facets which the keenest of living critics cannot perceive to-day. We shall steadily learn to know him more accurately, more solidly, more sensibly. But what does seem to me likely is that several years or even some decades may pass before we make much advance on the ground so vigorously won in 1898.

EDMUND GOSSE.